
Birding Cameroon, part 2

Southern Cameroon: forests, low to lofty

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Photographs by Ron Hoff and Callan Cohen

Observer les oiseaux au Cameroun, 2ème partie: les forêts du sud camerounais. Les auteurs présentent les sites de la zone forestière camerounaise les plus intéressants du point de vue ornithologique. La zone comprend deux Zones d'Endémisme d'Oiseaux ayant chacune une avifaune bien distincte: les montagnes camerounaises et la zone de basse altitude du Cameroun et du Gabon. La première, qui comprend également le Plateau d'Obudu au Nigéria et l'île de Bioko, compte 26 espèces d'oiseaux endémiques, dont 24 peuvent être observées le plus facilement au Cameroun à trois sites clés: (1) le Mont Cameroun, (2) le Mont Koupé et les Monts Bakossi, et (3) les Monts Bamenda (voir Tableau 1). Le site à visiter dans la zone de basse altitude est le Parc national de Korup, où on a une bonne chance de voir le Picatharte du Cameroun *Picathartes oreas*.

Biogeographically, southern Cameroon encompasses two highly distinct and unique avifaunas. The forests and grasslands of the Cameroon Mountains Endemic Bird Area (EBA), which extend marginally beyond the borders of Cameroon to Equatorial Guinea (the island of Bioko) and Nigeria (Obudu Plateau), is the most significant of these. A substantial 26 bird species are confined to the lofty heights of this region (hereafter 'endemics'; nomenclature follows *Birds of Western Africa*¹), 24 of which are best seen in Cameroon. The distribution of each endemic among the discontinuous chain of mountains differs, with some being widespread and others localised to one or two peaks (Table 1). Birders need visit only three key areas to see all of the endemics: (1) Mount Cameroon, (2) Mount Kupe and the Bakossi Mountains, and (3) the Bamenda Highlands.

Besides the unique and diverse highlands, the juxtaposed lowlands provide a complementary set of forest birds. Six of these, including the renowned Red-headed Picathartes *Picathartes oreas*, are largely restricted to the Cameroon and Gabon Lowlands EBA¹¹. These two distinct eco-regions combine to make southern Cameroon one of the most exciting forest regions on the continent.

With these biogeographical criteria in mind, we overview birding in southern Cameroon, focusing specifically on the uniqueness of the region. We first move inland along the cool mountain chain

and then digress into the lowlands. All key sites are recognised for their global importance in conserving Cameroon's rare and range-restricted birds⁵. Importantly, BirdLife International has not only recognised the conservation importance of this region, but has embarked on various conservation initiatives in collaboration with its local partner, the Cameroon Biodiversity Conservation Society (CBCS), and other conservation organisations.

Birders can play an important role in the conservation of this area and are encouraged to submit their sightings to the CBCS (c/o BP 3055, Messa, Yaoundé, Cameroon; e-mail: cbcs@iccnnet.cm) to help ongoing monitoring of these threatened sites. Most threatened of all these areas is the Bamenda Highlands, where community-linked conservation projects, using Bannerman's Turaco *Tauraco bannermani* as their focal bird, have been implemented. Communities are also involved in the conservation of Mount Kupe and Mount Cameroon. At all these sites, visitors are encouraged to support these projects by making use of local forest guides. For further details and tips on practical access to these sites a number of reports are available on the internet, including our own tour reports and annotated checklists (www.birdingafrica.com). Also available for download is our detailed guide to birding in Cameroon for independent travellers (write to cameroon@birdingafrica.com).

Mount Cameroon

For much of the year western Africa's loftiest mountain (4,095 m) is concealed under a dense blanket of cloud. Rising steeply from the Atlantic Ocean, warm, moist air is trapped along the seaward slopes, each year pouring more than 10 m of rain onto its well-leached soils. The northern slopes are the driest and most accessible, harbouring a number of endemics restricted to the mountain: **Mount Cameroon Francolin** *Francolinus camerunensis*, **Mount Cameroon Speirops** *Speirops melanocephalus* and **Mountain Saw-wing** *Psalidoprocne fuliginosa* (the latter also on Bioko), and a total of 18 EBA endemics.

The biodiversity of Mount Cameroon has recently come under severe pressure from agriculture, excessive burning and hunting. Once the lower slopes of the mountain were covered in a swathe of dense forest, which continued into the lowlands. Now agriculture is pushing higher up the mountain, forcing the forest into a narrower and more degraded belt. Still, productive forests holding most of the endemics can be found away from Buea, particularly on the north-west slope, in some places spanning an altitudinal range of 900–1,600 m. Here, **Mount Cameroon Francolin** still skulks in the primary forest understorey, only occasionally coming to the forest edge. Ten years ago a lucky few could see them on the very rough track to the radio mast above Buea, but now they are only to be reliably found on the less-intensely hunted north-western slopes, where they are still difficult to observe. It is not easy to visit this remote area—one needs to hire a guide, hike a long way and camp in the forest—but the sight of one of these rare birds stalking through the forest undergrowth is an unforgettable experience.

Still, there is much to keep one below the treeline on the north-east slope. Nectar-bearing plants, particularly common at the forest edge, attract a vivid array of sunbirds, including **Cameroon Cyanomitra** *oritis* and **Ursula's Sunbirds** *Cinnyris ursulae*. Ghost-like whistles of **Green-breasted Bush-shrike** *Malaconotus gladiator* drift through the misty air, together with the fluty melody of **Crossley's Ground Thrush** *Zoothera crossleyi*. Watch for **Little Oliveback** *Nesocharis shelleyi* and **Oriole Finch** *Linurgus olivaceus* feeding in dense tangles and vines, together with **Yellow-breasted Boubou** *Laniarius atroflavus*. With some

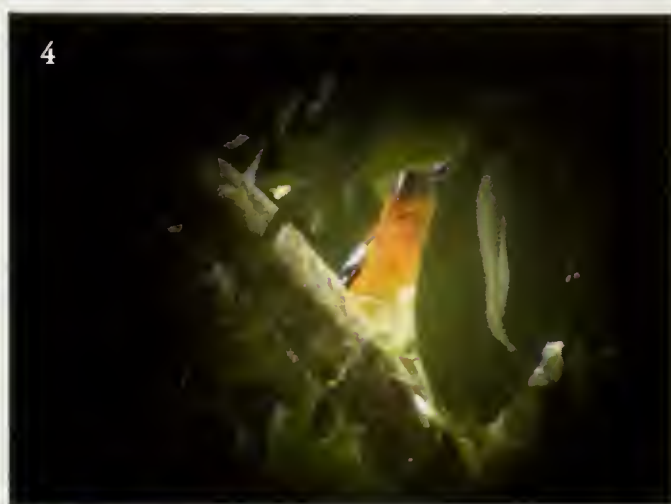
patience **Cameroon Olive Greenbul** *Phyllastrephus poensis* and **White-tailed Warbler** *Poliolais lopezi* can be seen in the dark, moist forest undergrowth. Ever-active groups of **Black-capped Woodland Warblers** *Phylloscopus herberti* join mixed-species feeding flocks, and with some luck **Cameroon Olive Pigeon** *Columba sjostedti* can be spotted gorging itself on ripe-red fruit.

Above the treeline the habitat opens, being dominated by grassland with scattered trees and forest patches in the gullies. Suddenly **Mountain Saw-wing** is numerous, flitting along the forest border in small flocks. This is also the domain of the mountain's most sought-after endemic, the unusual white-eye **Mount Cameroon Speirops**. Parties move restlessly through small forest patches in gullies. Also listen for the explosive call of **Evergreen Forest Warbler** *Bradypterus lopezi*, the local race *camerunensis* sometimes treated as an endemic species **Cameroon Evergreen Forest Warbler**. Higher still, the grass becomes shorter and sparser, ideal habitat for the endemic race of **African Pipit** *Anthus cinnamomeus*, often treated as a full species, **Cameroon Pipit** *A. cameroonensis*.

The heart of the highlands: Mount Kupe and the Bakossi Mountains

Of all Cameroon's birding spots, Mount Kupe is the most celebrated, not least because it hosts one of the world's rarest birds (**Mount Kupe Bush-shrike** *Malaconotus kupeensis*) and a genus of charismatic babbler (mountain babblers, *Kupeornis*) bearing its name. A mixture of farmbush and forest on the lower slopes creates a mosaic of bird-rich habitats—around 350 species have been recorded in the area—which could engage birders for days, whilst the higher slopes hold 15 Cameroon endemics. Mount Kupe and its birds have received prominent exposure by Bowden & Andrews³ and Bowden², although it should be noted that this is no longer a reliable site for **Red-headed Picathartes**. Still, it holds healthy populations of many of the endemics.

However, because most of the endemics are more readily found in the Bakossi Mountains (see below), the mid-altitude farmbush vegetation on the lower slopes is of greatest interest here. **Forest Swallow** *Hirundo fuliginosa*, a Cameroon and Gabon Lowlands endemic, is common on the lower slopes of the mountain, particularly along



1. Red-headed Picathartes *Picathartes oreas* (Tasso Leventis, courtesy of BirdLife International)
2. Mountain Robin Chat / Cossyphé d'Isabelle *Cossypha isabellae* (Callan Cohen)
3. Green-breasted Bush-shrike / Gladiateur à poitrine verte *Malaconotus gladiator* (Callan Cohen)
4. Crossley's Ground Thrush / Grive de Crossley *Zoothera crossleyi* (Callan Cohen)
5. Yellow-billed Barbet / Barbican pourpré *Trachylaemus purpuratus* (Callan Cohen)
6. Many-coloured Bush-shrike / Gladiateur multicolore *Malaconotus multicolor* (Ron Hoff)
7. Western Bluebill / Sénégalais sanguin *Spermophaga*

- haematina* (Ron Hoff)
8. Grey-headed Broadbill / Eurylaime à tête grise *Smithornis sharpei* (Ron Hoff)
9. Brown-capped Weaver / Tisserin à cape brune *Ploceus insignis* (Ron Hoff)
10. Bannerman's Turaco / Touraco de Bannerman *Tauraco bannermani* (Ron Hoff)
11. African Pipit / Pipit africain *Anthus cinnamomeus lynesi* (Ron Hoff)
12. Lesser Bristlebill / Bulbul jaunelore *Bleda notata* (Ron Hoff)
13. Rufous-sided Broadbill / Eurylaime à flancs roux *Smithornis rufolateralis* (Ron Hoff)

the Nature Trail. Also watch for **Bates's Swift** *Apus batesi* overhead. Due to the open nature of the habitat, a plethora of fruit-eaters can be seen here: numerous barbet species can be heard simultaneously, including the decidedly ugly **Naked-faced Barbet** *Gymnobucco calvus*, and its scarcer but equally grotesque cousin **Bristle-nosed Barbet** *G. peli*.

Mixed foraging flocks of insectivores can hold scores of species. Sifting through the commoner birds should turn up **Black-shouldered Puffback** *Dryoscopus senegalensis* and **Rufous-crowned Eremomela** *Eremomela badiceps*, and if you are lucky **Bioko Batis** *Batis poensis* (of which the

mainland race *occulta* is sometimes considered a separate species, **West African Batis**) and **Preuss's Golden-backed Weaver** *Ploceus preussi*. Three of the mountains' most sought-after birds include **Many-coloured Bush-shrike** *Malaconotus multicolor*, **Grey-headed Broadbill** *Smithornis sharpei* and **African Piculet** *Sasia africana*, all of which can be incredibly difficult to find unless their calls are known. For those who are more optimistic, **White-naped Pigeon** *Columba albinucha* has been seen here and in the Bakossis. **Bates's Weaver** *Ploceus batesi*, the latter perhaps Cameroon's least-known lowland endemic, has also been recorded in the past, although not for

Table 1. Birds confined to the Cameroon Mountains EBA ¹¹, and their occurrence within the three key birding sites, Mount Cameroon, Mount Kupe and the Bakossi Mountains, and the Bamenda Highlands. E = Species endemic within the political boundaries of Cameroon.

Tableau 1. Oiseaux confinés à la Zone d'Endémisme d'Oiseaux des montagnes camerounaises¹¹, et leur présence à trois sites clés: le Mont Cameroun, le Mont Koupé et les Monts Bakossi, et les Monts Bamenda. E = espèce endémique à l'intérieur des frontières politiques du Cameroun.

	Mount Cameroon	Mount Kupe & Bakossi Mts	Bamenda Highlands
Mount Cameroon Francolin / Francolin du Mont Cameroun <i>Francolinus camerunensis</i>	E		
Cameroon Olive Pigeon / Pigeon du Cameroun <i>Columba sjostedti</i>	•	•	•
Bannerman's Turaco / Touraco de Bannerman <i>Tauraco bannermani</i>			E
Mountain Saw-wing / Hirondelle brune <i>Psalidoprocne fuliginosa</i>	•		
Cameroon Montane Greenbul / Bulbul concolore <i>Andropadus montanus</i>	•	•	•
Western Mountain Greenbul / Bulbul à gorge grise <i>Andropadus tephrolaemus</i>	•	•	•
Cameroon Olive Greenbul / Bulbul olivâtre <i>Phyllastrephus poensis</i>	•	•	•
Grey-headed Greenbul / Bulbul à ventre jaune <i>Phyllastrephus poliocephalus</i>	•	•	
Mountain Robin Chat / Cossyphe d'Isabelle <i>Cossypha isabellae</i>	•	•	•
Bangwa Forest Warbler / Bouscarle du Bangwa <i>Bradypterus bangwaensis</i>			•
Green Longtail / Prinia verte <i>Urolais epichlora</i>	•	•	•
Bamenda Apalis / Apalis du Bamenda <i>Apalis bamendae</i>			E
White-tailed Warbler / Poliolais à queue blanche <i>Poliolais lopezi</i>	•	•	
Black-capped Woodland Warbler / Pouillot à tête noire <i>Phylloscopus herberti</i>	•	•	
Banded Wattle-eye / Prit du Bamenda <i>Platysteira laticincta</i>			E
White-throated Mountain Babbler / Phyllanthe à gorge blanche <i>Kupeornis gilberti</i>		•	
Cameroon Sunbird / Souimanga à tête bleue <i>Cyanomitra oritis</i>	•	•	•
Ursula's Sunbird / Souimanga d'Ursula <i>Cinnyris ursulae</i>	•	•	
Mount Cameroon Speirops / Speirops du Cameroun <i>Speirops melanocephalus</i>	E		
Green-breasted Bush-shrike / Gladiateur à poitrine verte <i>Malaconotus gladiator</i>	•	•	•
Mount Kupe Bush-shrike / Gladiateur du Kupé <i>Malaconotus kupeensis</i>		E	
Yellow-breasted Boubou / Gonolek à ventre jaune <i>Laniarius atroflavus</i>	•		•
Bannerman's Weaver / Tisserin de Bannerman <i>Ploceus bannermani</i>		(•)*	•
Little Oliveback / Dos-vert à tête noire <i>Nesocharis shelleyi</i>	•	•	•
TOTAL	17	16	15

*Not present on Mount Kupe and only very marginally in the Bakossi Mountains.

some time. All recent records appear to come from the far south of the country, near Gabon.

Of equal stature to Mount Kupe, but ornithologically almost unknown, the remote Bakossi Mountains harbour a similar avifauna and are proving a reliable site for **Mount Kupe Bush-shrike**, which was first seen here in the early 1990s and photographed in 2002⁴. Access is trickier, but many of the birds are easier to find once you have reached the village of Kodmin (see also Mills & Cohen⁹). Birders should, however, not visit without first making enquiries at the WWF office in Nyasoso. The forest at Kodmin is part of a different community project and one needs to pay a forest fee and hire guides from the village itself. Birders need to exercise respect and should not attempt to enter the forest without the blessing of the local chief.

Chubb's Cisticola *Cisticola chubbi*, of which the Cameroon population is sometimes treated as a separate species, **Brown-backed Cisticola** *C. discolor*, occurs in the rank vegetation on the edge of the village. Climbing out of the village, the narrow track winds through a mixture of secondary growth and farm bush where **Cameroon Montane Greenbul** *Andropadus montanus* and **Tullberg's Woodpecker** *Campethera tullbergi* are regular and **Cameroon and Ursula's Sunbirds** flit among the abundance of flowering plants. The secretive **Red-faced Crimsonwing** *Cryptospiza reichenovii* may be seen feeding quietly on the track. At the forest edge watch for **Black Bee-eater** *Merops gularis* sallying from its treetop perch, and **Green Longtail** *Urolais epichlora* and **Brown-capped Weaver** *Ploceus insignis* in the mixed flocks. Due to the steep nature of the terrain the forest canopy is sometimes at eye level, making this also one of the best sites to see the fierce-looking **Green-breasted Bush-shrike**. Dense undergrowth within the forest supports chattering groups of **Cameroon Olive Greenbuls**, the restless **White-tailed Warbler** and shy **Bocage's Akalat** *Sheppardia bocagei*. Once in the forest proper, try to locate a mixed feeding flock, which are often dominated by noisy bands of **White-throated Mountain Babblers** *Kupeornis gilberti* and **Grey-headed Greenbuls** *Phyllastrephus poliocephalus*. Other species to watch for include **Western Mountain Greenbul** *Andropadus tephrolaemus*, **Black-necked Wattle-eye** *Dyaphorophya chalybea*, **Black-capped Woodland Warbler**, **Black-winged**

Oriole *Oriolus nigripennis*, **Pink-footed Puffback** *Dryoscopus angolensis* and **Mountain Sooty Boubou** *Laniarius poensis*.

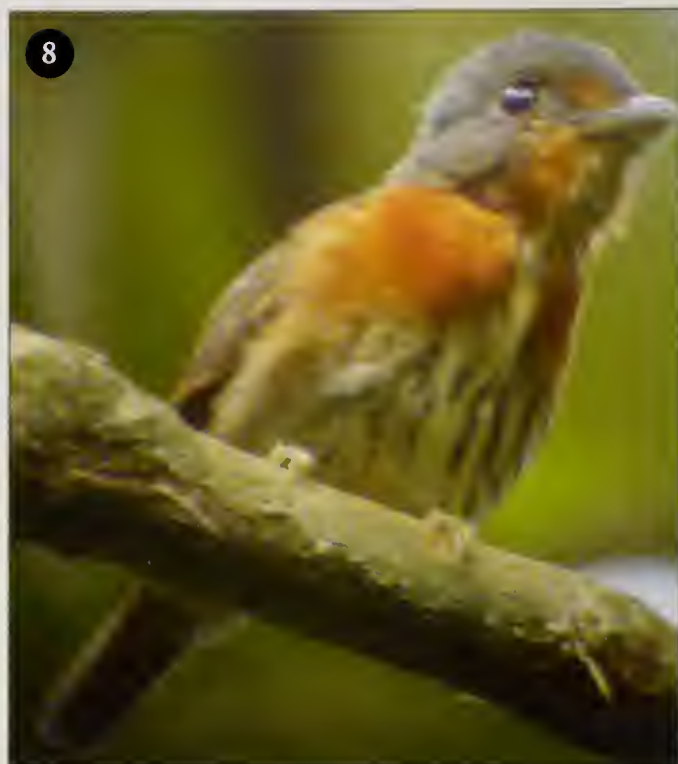
However, **Mount Kupe Bush-shrike** will certainly be the highlight for anyone lucky enough to find it. This site is undoubtedly the best place to observe this elusive species, a number of pairs of which occur in ridge-top forests along the network of trails. Until ten years ago it was known only from Mount Kupe, making the discovery of a larger population in the Bakossi Mountains vital for its survival.

Bamenda

Most degraded of Cameroon's uplands, the localised endemics of the Bamenda Highlands cling to the last remnant forest patches. Sixteen endemics occur here, of which **Bannerman's Turaco** and **Banded Wattle-eye** *Platysteira laticincta* are confined to these highlands. The most accessible site where these species still occur is the Bafut-Ngemba Forest Reserve, really a plantation forest with natural forest in narrow riparian strips. In the early morning the rasping call of **Bannerman's Turaco** can be heard from isolated valleys. **Banded Wattle-eye** is scarce here and requires more time and good fortune to track down. Among the other endemics, this is the best site for species that prefer rank secondary growth. **Mountain Robin Chat** *Cossypha isabellae*, **Bangwa Forest Warbler** *Bradypterus bangwaensis*, **Chubb's Cisticola** and **Bannerman's Weaver** *Ploceus bannermani* are usually easy to see, and **Yellow-breasted Boubou** skulks among dense tangles.

Mount Oku, the largest remaining patch of forest, holds much more significant populations of endemics, but is more difficult to reach. This is certainly the best site for **Banded Wattle-eye** and **Bannerman's Turaco**, and is regarded to hold the only viable population of these two threatened species⁶. Also, **Cameroon Olive Pigeon** and **Little Oliveback** are more readily seen here than at Bafut-Ngemba. Other forest species to watch for include the colourful **Oriole Finch**, **Cameroon Montane Greenbul** and **Western Mountain Greenbul**.

The last of the Cameroon Mountains endemics, **Bamenda Apalis** *Apalis bamendae*, has a unique distribution. It ranges from wooded gullies and ravines around Bamenda north to the Adamawa Plateau, where it can also be seen at Ngaoundaba



Ranch⁸. The best area to look for it is in the remaining patches of gallery forest near the town of Bali, west of Bamenda.

Korup National Park: Picathartes

No doubt, anyone setting foot into one of Africa's most ancient forests will be in nervous anticipation of one of the world's most bizarre and elusive birds, the famed **Red-headed Picathartes**. Birders should enter Korup from Mundemba and aim to search the vicinity of Picathartes Knoll, about a 10-km walk from the Mana River. Rengo Rock Camp, conveniently situated less than 2 km from the knoll, is an excellent base from which to explore the surrounding forest. Coming from Mundemba, an early start over the Mana River suspension bridge provides opportunity for scanning for hornbills: the smaller **Piping** *Bycanistes fistulator* and **White-thighed** *B. albotibialis* are more tolerant of habitat degradation and can even be seen on the road between Mundemba and Ekondo Titi, whereas the colossal **Yellow-casqued** *Ceratogymna elata* and **Black-casqued** *C. atrata* are largely restricted to primary forest. Overhead, too, watch for flocks of swifts which may contain **Sabine's Spinetail** *Rhaphidura sabini* or the rarer **Cassin's Spinetail** *Neafrapus cassini*, or **Bates's Swift**. **Grey Parrot** *Psittacus erithacus* is common here and can usually be seen in some numbers. As daytime temperatures increase, watch for soaring raptors, of which **Cassin's Hawk Eagle** *Spizaetus africanus* is most regular. Below, scan the rocky riverbed for resident **Rock Pratincole** *Glareola nuchalis*. The deep hoot of **Black-throated Coucal** *Centropus leucogaster* will draw you into the forest, but you will need to be lucky to see this extreme skulker.

Once in the forest birding becomes much more challenging, but the rewards are impressive. Ant columns attract an array of understory species such as **Fire-crested Alethe** *Alethe diademata*, **Forest Robin** *Stiphrornis erythrothorax*, **Lesser Bleda** *Bleda notata* and **Red-tailed Bristlebills** *B. syndactyla*, and **Pale-breasted Illadopsis** *Illadopsis rufipennis* and **Blackcap Illadopsis** *I. cleaveri*. Watch the tangled midstorey for colourful forest weavers and wattle-eyes: **Blue-billed Malimbus** *Malimbus nitens*, **Crested M.** *malimbicus*, **Red-vented M.** *scutatus* and **Rachel's Malimb** *M. racheliae*, and **Chestnut** *Dyaphorophya castanea*, **White-spotted D.** *tonsa* and **Yellow-bellied Wattle-**

eyes D. *concreta* can all be seen. Greenbuls are also a feature here, and will pose some identification challenges, particularly the **Icterine** *Phyllastrephus icterinus*/**Xavier's P.** *xavieri* and **Red-tailed** *Criniger calurus*/**White-bearded C.** *ndussumensis*/**Eastern Bearded C.** *chloronotus* complexes. The warbler-like **Fraser's Sunbird** *Deleornis fraseri* is common and can be seen in most feeding flocks. Canopy species may include **Yellow-billed Turaco** *Tauraco macrorhynchus*, **Lemon-bellied Crombec** *Sylvietta denti* and **Blue Cuckoo-shrike** *Coracina azurea*.

Species that don't join mixed flocks are often more challenging to track down and usually require knowledge of their calls. The deep, mournful hoots of **Blue-headed Wood Dove** *Turtur brehmeri* can be heard around Rengo Camp, but often the only views obtained are of a small dove flushing off the track. **Latham's Forest Francolin** *Francolinus lathamii* and **Black Guinea fowl** *Agelastes niger* are also present; scratch marks in the leaf litter indicate their favourite haunts. Midstorey species are often the easiest to see. **Rufous-sided Broadbill** *Smithornis rufolateralis* performs its clockwork display flight at dusk and dawn, and **Red-billed Dwarf Tockus** *camurus* and **White-crested Hornbills** *Tropicranus albocristatus* are quite noisy, the latter often in the vicinity of monkey troops. You are also sure to hear **Chestnut-backed Owlet** *Glaucidium sjostedti*, **Bare-cheeked Trogon** *Apaloderma aequatoriale* and **Chocolate-backed Kingfisher** *Halcyon badia*, but these species often stay high in the canopy, making them exceptionally difficult to spot.

The list of species to be seen in Korup is long^{7,10,12}. Other mouth-watering possibilities include **White-crested Tiger Heron** *Tigriornis leucolophus*, **Spot-breasted Ibis** *Bostrychia rara*, **Congo Serpent Eagle** *Dryotriorchis spectabilis*, **Long-tailed Hawk** *Urotriorchis marourus*, **Black Dwarf Hornbill** *Tockus hartlaubi*, **Lyre-tailed Honeyguide** *Melichneutes robustus*, **Nkulengu Rail** *Himantornis haematopus* and **Vermiculated Fishing Owl** *Scotopelia bouvieri*, the latter two present around Rengo Camp earlier this year.

Acknowledgements

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